

# INTRODUCTION

## Where Have All the Homeless Gone?



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For a decade from 1983 to 1993, homelessness was a major public concern in the United States. It was big business in social science, social policy, and national news. In 1987 the United States Congress passed the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, which set aside one billion dollars for research and support programs designed to help the homeless. In 1990 discothèques across the United States rocked to a summer hit about a homeless woman, while anthropology, sociology, public health, and social work departments offered semester-long classes devoted to studying this population. Community groups and advocacy organizations fought politicians over homeless policy and ordinary citizens named homelessness, along with crime and the economy, as a major concern.

This widespread concern for the homeless suddenly began to wane in 1993. People stopped identifying homelessness as a major issue, public expenditures for homeless relief decreased, and media coverage of homelessness steadily declined. Despite all this, housing affordability indexes continued to drop in most major urban areas, per person space densities continued to rise, and the number of people seeking public shelter held steady or increased (U.S. Census 2004). Despite the billions of dollars spent on homeless research and services during the late 1980s and early 1990s, there has not been a time over the last decade when a nocturnal tour of the streets and subways of New York City has not revealed large numbers of people without proper housing. Studies by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty (2004) suggest that there may actually be more people without proper housing in the first years of the twenty-first century than there were in the days of the 1980s homeless crisis.

Today, little is said or published about the homeless and few cite homelessness as one of the major public concerns. Although dramatic rises in

housing loss have been noted for major cities in the United States since the economic downturn that accompanied the election of George W. Bush in 2000, homelessness still does not garner the press coverage or general outrage it did during the homeless crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, homelessness often goes completely unnoticed, now. Always a good bellwether of the winds of public opinion and concern, the 1988 *New York Times* annual index devoted almost 200 inches of space to articles about homelessness, while the year 1999 had less than 20 inches. The steady decline in coverage of the homeless by “the newspaper of record” began in 1993, the year Clinton came into office. There has not been a year with 50 inches since 1995. The homeless crisis passed, while the homeless remain.

If any lesson is to be learned from the failure of homeless policy in the 1980s and 1990s to solve the problems it sought to address, it is necessary to understand not only why so many people lost housing, but also how the “homeless crisis,” which garnered so much attention, was sociopolitically made and unmade with so little resolution. The ideological question of how “the homeless” took center stage in urban public policy during the 1980s then disappeared like so many Bobbitts, Buttafuocos, and O.J. Simpsons during the 1990s is ultimately a question about how poverty, public policy, and “difference” are socially constructed in American political culture.

This book, based on five years of participant-observation fieldwork among underhoused nonwhite populations living in extreme poverty in New York City in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as well as a brief return to the field in 1997–98, suggests answers to these two questions by looking at the way the homeless crisis was socially constructed by public policy makers, social scientists, and those whose job it was to provide homeless relief. It is the argument of this book that mass housing loss in urban America during the 1980s came to be defined as a “homeless crisis” due more to a set of peculiarly American misunderstandings about poverty, race, and social difference combined with conflict between the Democrat and the Republican Parties than to the actual rising housing costs, declining employment opportunities and reduced social services that forced thousands of people into the streets of American cities.

The social problems that drove men and women to beg for change or just pass idle days in public could have been understood and addressed in a variety of concrete, holistic, and empirically defined ways, leading to practical, substantive, and easily assessed policies. It could have been viewed as a crisis of affordable housing, in which rising housing costs throughout newly gentrifying older center city areas were creating mass housing loss among families with few economic resources. In such a scenario state policy might have been oriented toward a variety of housing policies and tax code changes designed to help the displaced, those in danger of displacement, and everybody for whom housing was problematic. Such a broad housing policy directed at the overall state of social housing could have had both ameliorative and prophylactic value for a variety of related urban social problems.

The problem also might have been identified as an employment crisis for those at the bottom of a changing economy. The mass displacements in which old sectors of the economy were replaced by new ones with different work regimens, different career trajectories, and different required skill sets has been documented by scholars from such fields as industrial organization, political science, sociology, and community psychology. The millions of families that were immiserated by this changing economy in the 1980s had traditionally relied on wages from unionized public sector employment and relatively unskilled industrial labor. They could no longer rely on this sector as union participation shrank, and older industries moved to the third world and the non-union “sunbelt” or reduced relative wages by employing immigrants who were able to live on less or draw on the combined incomes of large kin groups. Such a scenario could have yielded concrete and easily assessed public and private employment programs designed to improve both employment opportunities and the skills of the displaced and those in danger of displacement, as well as overall expanded social support for the unemployed.

The health care and educational aspects of the crisis could have been managed through concrete, definable, and practical remedies. The 1980s was a period in which public mental and physical health crises emerged in older urban areas. From the recrudescence of nineteenth-century diseases connected to poverty, such as tuberculosis, amoebic dysentery, and malaria to newer poverty-linked diseases such as AIDS, many of the poorer urban areas came to look like public health disaster zones. A rhetorical statistic cited by many during this period was that Central Harlem had the same infant mortality rate as Bangladesh. I remember times when a trip to work in the morning required stepping over a beggar with untreated elephantiasis. Far too often many of these problems were identified with the vague impressionistic term homelessness and were confronted through reactive measures addressing the almost ethnicized group that was embodied by this term.

Instead of narrating this synergy of crises as having been caused by its constituent social policy elements and attacking each part with concrete remedies designed to address such broad and holistic concerns as social housing, working class employment, or public health and education it was identified with an atomized group of individuals, the homeless, who were designated to receive a new form of totalizing public assistance. This was a group whose social difference was defined by a vague set of impressionistic signifiers that were often racially biased and never clearly specified, making effective social policy problematic. Following past urban poverty crises, the debate over the homeless developed into a mirror image of the “culture of poverty” debate. Scholars discussed how the homeless fit into other categories of poor people without ever settling on exactly who it was they were discussing.

In this book, I will interrogate the social categories and theoretical assumptions upon which these debates rested. Using data from the lives of

those designated as homeless, those employed to provide services for them, and those who studied them, I will show the ways in which American political culture, U.S. urban poverty scholarship, and institutional constraints, have reified folk categories of social distinction like “homeless,” “underclass,” “inner-city,” “welfare queen,” “black family,” “other America,” etc. These invidious categories, which define and delimit success and failure, have tended to obscure rather than clarify the causes of poverty in America. Most importantly, the use of such vague and invidious categories and the rarified intellectual terrain upon which the debate over poverty amelioration has occurred, has impeded developing real solutions to this terrible problem, wasted vast sums of money, and ground down both the people who have suffered from these many social problems and the people who have made it their career to try to help them. By demonstrating the wide chasm between the actual lives of the hundreds of people I met on fieldwork and the social assumptions that underlay public policy, social science and homeless relief services I will critically assess the poverty relief programs that America has struggled with for the last forty years.

### *Bees, Ants, Neanderthals, and Humans*

Every human collectivity in the history of the world has had a certain number of people at any given moment who either are not able to actively contribute their labor to the surrounding society or are not expected to contribute. There are also planned and unplanned periods in every person’s life when working is not expected or encouraged. From the intense period of socialization and learning that has come to be called childhood to professional rites of passage such as law and medical school to periods of mental and physical illness, the immediate aftermath of childbirth, and old age, every human life is expected to be a combination of periods of work and nonwork. Even the poorest third world societies expect that there are times when people do not work. The vacation has become a recognized right, even in countries with the most extreme work regimens like Japan, the United States, and Mexico. Premodern European peasant societies had their several score saint days per year and a variety of systems for providing support to those who had become too old to effectively labor. Archeological remains at Shanadar IV in Northern Iraq suggest that our distant Neanderthal relatives also expended energy and resources caring for the old, the sick, and the damaged.

Since not everybody in a society will work every day of his or her life, states, which are the primary administrator of modern economy and society, are forced to produce policy to address this fact. The United States, like most of Latin America, for a variety of historical and economic reasons, has had a far more problematic relationship with its non-working populations than its European cousins have during the last century. In the 1990s the United States saw its longest and possibly most profitable

period of economic boom in history. This has tended to obscure the view of poverty in America, leaving the sixty million who remained in poverty far less noticed and fuelling an orectic ethos that has marginalized such traditional social science discussions as the “feminization of poverty,” “crisis of the inner cities,” and “the underclass.”

With the passing of the post-cold war economic boom, such discussions may once again become important and social policies addressing those who cannot support themselves through wage labor may repeat many past mistakes. The same political forces that convinced America in the 1960s that there was an “other America” submerged in a “culture of poverty,” marketed the underclass in the 1970s, and promoted homelessness as a national crisis in the 1980s remain an important part of American politics. It is likely that once the current hype over “war against terror” subsides, new policies may emerge that repeat the errors of the past. It is for this reason that we need to take a careful look at the birth, rise, and decline of the last major poverty crisis of the twentieth century, as it was lived by people who lost housing, and those who cared for them, studied them, made public policy for them, and profited from them.

## Research Methods

The research for this book was conducted over a five year period from the late 1980s to the middle 1990s. My first forays into research on the homeless were in 1989, when I joined a research practicum as a graduate student in the PhD program in anthropology at the City University of New York Graduate Center. This practicum was composed of two other students, Alfredo Gonzalez and Walter Ewing, and led by Professor Leith Mullings, who at the time was specializing in studies of urban poverty. Our fieldwork sought to examine the causes of the urban riots of the summer of 1988 in Tompkins Square Park, a small open space at the center of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, as part of a broader look at the political and ideological response to the assault on the “reluctant” American welfare state.

During the nearly nine months that my two research colleagues and I tramped around asking questions of people on the community board, local religious leaders, neighborhood old-timers, recent arrivals and local business owners the question of “the homeless” arose in nearly every interview. “The homeless” also came up every time the three of us sat in Dr. Mullings’s office and discussed our fieldwork and where it was leading. There had been a sizable contingent of people who regularly slept in the park who had participated in the riots, and a wide variety of our informants from anarchist squatters to the local police had an opinion about the role of these homeless park dwellers. I became fascinated by the importance of the moral discourse that emerged around this small, powerless, and relatively unimportant group of people. They seemed to be the moral

pivot around which discourse was crafted about what had happened on that hot summer night when protesters and police on horseback fought a running battle on the streets of the East Village. In 1990, while living in the East Village, I witnessed smaller, but still fierce riots in Tompkins Square Park, as well as an extended conflict between police and community activists over an abandoned public school that had been occupied and renamed, “the ABC Community Center.” In all such incidents, the homeless, despite their relative unimportance to what had happened seemed to be at the discursive center of the conflict.

In the winter of 1990, I was offered a job on a three-year McKinney Act funded demonstration project called Critical Time Intervention (CTI) designed to change homeless behavior and improve the chances of retaining permanent housing for the mentally ill. CTI tested an experimental weekly social work intervention designed to help create new community ties for 110 mentally ill homeless men who had been placed in transitional, usually psychosocially supportive, housing. One of the key goals of this project was to develop an efficient form of social remediation that would prevent men who had been homeless from engaging in “homeless specific behaviors” that they may have learned at the shelter. The most important of these behaviors was the desire to return to the familiar environment of the shelter.

I was one of two staff ethnographers, along with Alfredo Gonzalez from the previous project, hired to track and interview participants in the study. Since we were both planning to use our research for a doctoral thesis, we each took a half time post, in order to give ourselves plenty of time to follow up interesting research opportunities and contacts outside our responsibilities to CTI. I moved my home and all my belongings from the East Village to an apartment near Columbia University that was a short distance from the shelter in Washington Heights and many of the transitional housing facilities on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The research project involved studying the 110 men over three years. Each of the men in the study was “placed” in a variety of community based transitional housing, including natal family homes, unsupported Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels, supported SROs and “intensive supportive community residences,” which were much like small-scale psychiatric hospitals. It was our job to develop a rapport with the subjects before they left the shelter, keep track of them in the community, and locate them when they disappeared. Each month for eighteen months we went out to their placements to administer a paid interview that recorded the places they remembered sleeping during the month. We were randomly assigned men who were in both the control and experimental groups and it was our job to reconstruct each man’s month to determine how many nights he had been homeless. A CTI social worker would regularly visit each of the experimental group members over a nine-month period and we were to chart behavioral changes during the intervention and for nine months after the intervention had ended. There were new subjects entering the

study every month. Finally, our primary ethnographic goal was to make a qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of the CTI intervention.

In preparation for these interviews, I spent several months passing entire days and evenings hanging out in the shelter, drinking beer with shelter residents in neighborhood doorways, parks, and bars and talking to clients at Community Support Services (CSS), the shelter mental health unit where research subjects were recruited. My informants were adult males of all ages of either African American or Latin American descent.

Because many of my informants had problems that made placement difficult, and their new housing was by definition transitional, I found myself following their tracks to prisons, other states, psychiatric hospitals, and even a homeless resettlement camp in rural upstate New York. I lived near several of the major placement facilities and saw many of my informants far more frequently than the once a month that was prescribed by the study. As I developed a rapport with some of them, I found myself having breakfasts with them at local diners or visiting them in jail. Several of them continued to occasionally reenter my life in one form or another long after the study had ended. Remarkably, neither my ethnographic companion and collaborator, Alfredo Gonzalez, nor I lost a single informant in our three years at CTI.

Since I was assigned fifty-five research subjects to interview over the course of three years, I had a fairly large selection of people and personalities with whom I could spend my own personal research time. I quickly discovered that many of my informants' mental illnesses were either extremely mild, largely situational, or part of a duplicitous strategy between client and social worker to obtain social service resources that were only available to shelter residents who had been diagnosed as mentally ill. These men, who were described by social workers as "higher functioning" became the "key informants" upon whom I most heavily depended for data and occasional help interpreting it.

A few of the fifty-five had mental illnesses or developmental disabilities that were severe enough that it was quite difficult or impossible for me to develop a rapport with them. Sometimes I gleaned insights into their lives through contact with neighbors and family members when I was unable to gain direct entry into their often solitary and bizarre worlds. With some of the fifty-five men I was responsible for tracking, I never got beyond the distances created by the American caste color system, and there were some informants who simply never liked me. However, I had several "key informants" over the years who argued with me, gave me support and friendship in the field, and shared good times. I sometimes accompanied them on their forays into illegal activity and often experienced danger side by side with them, in the often heavily armed world of the Washington Heights drug economy.

However, I made no life-long friends and never reached the point of acceptance and integration that Clifford Geertz describes in his "Notes on a Balinese Cockfight." Though I once spent a night sleeping with homeless

people at the Staten Island Ferry Terminal as part of Kim Hopper's study of the U.S. Census's attempt to count the homeless in 1990, I never spent a night in the shelter or slept in a park or on a train. This would have seemed like pretension to most of my informants and it seemed like unnecessary ethnographic pyrotechnics to me.

### *Organization of the Book*

Nearly every serious book written on the homeless begins with a definition that is used throughout the book. This book is similar in that chapter 1, entitled "Who Are the Homeless Really?" is about the problem of defining the homeless. However, instead of seeking a workable definition for the homeless based on some pragmatic or humanitarian consideration, I suggest that the very task of defining the homeless may have prefigured many of the problems with public policy. It is one of the central contentions of this book that the issue of definitions is one of the chief reasons why the billions of dollars spent on homeless aid seem to have done so little to resolve the problem.

One of the key reasons that a homeless crisis could appear and then disappear so quickly without any resolution or denouement is that the group that was identified as the subject of policy may not have really been a salient group. Without a clear definition of the target group or problem, designing policy becomes something like looking at a set of clouds floating through the sky: the angle from which they are regarded and the amount of sky in the field of vision determine the shape that is seen. Without agreed-upon boundaries and definitions, social science becomes no more than a series of exercises in imaginative description. In attempting to answer the question "who are the homeless, really" I have looked at who they said they were, who the researchers who studied them said they were, and who the ordinary people who shared city streets with them thought they were. It is in the interstices between the vastly different views of the many people who developed research and folk definitions for the homeless in the 1980s that the real nature of this group of people can be found.

Chapter 2, entitled "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Performance of Homelessness," addresses the specific and particular intersection of race and gender that challenges African American men in poverty. The public political representations of African American men were a highly contested discourse that directly impacted on the homeless crisis and became one of the focal points for public policy discussions in 1980s America. The 1988 presidential election largely turned on the discussion of an African American "ghetto super-predator" named Willie Horton. The problem of African American masculinity and gender socialization has long been a core aspect of discussions of both poverty and social deviance in American life. The homeless debate was no exception. This chapter pulls together some of the themes in these discussions and suggests ways



that the homeless crisis was a part of this larger discourse, during the 1980s on poverty and inequality in America.

Chapter 3, entitled “New York City and the Historiography of Homelessness,” is a critical review of some of the historiography of the homeless crisis. In identifying homelessness as a major site of public policy, scholars and politicians offered differing historiographies of mass housing loss in America that often related to their theoretical and methodological foci. By critically reviewing some of the historiographies of homelessness this chapter contextualizes and situates the homeless crisis of the 1980s in broader conflicts over politics and social inequality and provides a view of the ways in which different political conjunctures yield different types of housing crises.

Chapter 4, entitled “The Poverty of Poverty Studies,” continues from Chapter 3 in locating the rise of a homeless crisis of the 1980s in the broader politics of American society. Through a historical review of the theories that underlie academic poverty studies this chapter identifies some of the central methodological assumptions that contributed to making the homeless crisis of the 1980s different from previous crises of inadequate social housing. Locating these assumptions in the intersection between national politics and academic policy research, this chapter offers a critique of the instrumental use of social science to fine-tune the U.S. government poverty bureaucracy.

Chapter 5, entitled “Shelterization: In the Land of the Homeless,” examines the way homeless shelters often provided a key stage upon which the drama of a homeless crisis could be played. As early as 1981 Baxter and Hopper observed that it was very difficult to define, locate, count or help homeless individuals in the places where their problems had developed, limiting homeless studies to observing shopping bag ladies and ragged men at a distance (Baxter and Hopper 1981; Hopper 1992, 1995). Social science and social remediation that focused on homelessness required a real physical environment in which to study and engage the target population. The shelters provided the perfect location for such studies. As such, some researchers were tracked into studying in shelters where the homeless were plentiful and easy to study in a way that enabled the fulfillment of obligations to the government agencies that funded research. Concentrations of peripatetic individuals who often had little in common besides their use of the shelter were described and discussed as part of a bounded self-contained environment that often meant more to the researchers than it did to those without housing. As such, some researchers ended up studying the shelters rather than their occupants.

Chapter 6, entitled “Doin’ It in the System,” looks at the ways in which the social service system that was built to manage the homeless crisis structured the lives of its clients. Though the system was set up with the goal of rehabilitation and reform for these men’s disintegrating lives, for many of them, the very structures that were designed to aid them in getting back on their feet and finding some satisfaction in life, impeded or

blocked their progress. The rules and understandings of the system that had been set up to deal with the problem of homelessness put social worker and social worker into a frequently conflictive relationship over my informants' attempts to create a feeling of home in facilities that were designed to be transitional, often causing more harm than good. This chapter discusses the strategies that my informants used to negotiate the difficult path through the homeless bureaucracy.

Chapter 7, entitled "The Black Family and Homelessness," looks at the way discourses on African American family and kinship figured into the homeless crisis. The comparison between immigrant and African American family structures presented by Daniel Patrick Moynihan in his 1965 report to President Lyndon Johnson remains the most popular folk model for explaining success, failure, and mutual aid in poverty. Despite being savaged by social science in its first two decades and largely ignored in the last two, the Moynihan model, intensified by contemporary immigrant success narratives, informed many discussions of "the color of homelessness" and the problems of kin networks stretched thin by poverty. As such, explanations and remedies for the problems that created homelessness must, at the least, take into account the real or imagined differences between Euro-American and Afro-American kinship networks.

Chapter 8, entitled "Housing Panic and Urban Physiocrats," is somewhat different from the other chapters, in that it draws on field research from the Tompkins Square Park area and attempts to draw out some of the concerns facing ordinary New Yorkers who lived through the homeless crisis, but were never either designated "homeless" or paid to give care to or research individuals so designated. Looking for the perspective of "ordinary New Yorkers" in a neighborhood that was so bohemian, oppositional, and marginal that it spawned the Broadway musical *Rent* is, of course, counterintuitive. However, in the hothouse environment of the gentrifying East Village, many of the broader social concerns and tropes that fuelled the homeless crisis were forced to the surface, consciously articulated by the community, and distilled for public consumption. There were few places in New York City where the homeless were more frequently discussed, and it was perhaps the one neighborhood where actual "grassroots" activism around homelessness flourished outside the institutional confines of the welfare academic complex. As such this neighborhood was something of an exception that proves the rule: even in the unique situation where there is some small group of people who self-identify as homeless and have community ties, the homeless reification tends to melt away upon close inspection.

The final chapter, "American Thatcherism: The Making and Unmaking of a Crisis," presents conclusions that can be made about the rise and fall of homelessness and the future of poverty amelioration programs. As the United States government continues to pare away the generally unpopular and largely unsuccessful poverty programs that developed out of the New Deal, the Great Society, and Richard Nixon's post-1960s crisis man-

agement programs, very little is being created to replace them. The many well-intentioned statements about volunteerism, charity, and community values that became popular during the Clinton era have proved to be threadbare, even during the post-cold war economic boom period. However, the potential necessity for emergency management that looms on the horizon presents what amounts to a social planning gamble that will inevitably prove far more costly in both economic and human terms than the money saved by “ending welfare as we know it.” By pulling together a final balance sheet on what was one of the most important and well funded poverty policy crises of twentieth century America, it is my hope that this book can make a small and historically informed contribution to a reemerging discussion of the causes of and remedies for the problems of the roughly sixty million Americans who live at the economic and social margins of society.